

APARTHEID AND SOUTH AFRICAN JEWRY

An Exchange

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Ronald M. Segal: Some time ago, while shuffling through a pile of magazines at the home of a friend, I came across the January number of COMMENTARY and turned with some interest to an article in it by Dan Jacobson on "The Jews of South Africa." When I put the magazine down again, I felt cheated somehow and angry. But it was a good anger, for it forced me to reconsider my moral judgment of the South African Jewish community.

I am, like Mr. Jacobson, a South African Jew. My parents were both communal leaders: my father head of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies until his death, and my mother for many years the leader of the Women's Zionist Organization in Cape Town. My home was in all fundamentals a passionately Jewish one and I was brought up from the beginning to believe that being a Jew entailed unavoidable responsibilities and duties—superficially toward the community and the wider society of which I was a part, basically toward broad principles of justice and generosity. One's first duty was to one's own, but it did not stop there. And so my father, as head of the Jewish Board of Deputies, was automatically an executive member of the Cape Community Chest, an interracial, intersectarian charity guild. The one followed hot on the heels of the other. If the mass of South African Jews brought anything with them from Lithuania, I was told, and myself perceived, it was the

moral hypersensitivity of the long afflicted. The centuries of Passovers and pogroms had sharpened their horror of oppression and unreason to the finest point.

I have heard many men talk about justice. Some of them spit it out, as though it was sour, others flash it about like an engagement ring. But South African Jews use the word passionately. They fondle it and rest their ears against it, they beseech it and bow their heads before it. I remember the public meetings and the interminable private discussions during the weeks before the establishment of Israel, the cry to the nations in the name of humanity and right, the wringing of the hands over Britain as a country that had lost sight of the just.

I have for so long been glad that this should be so, and for so long angry that it should be so in the inbred way that it is. For the passion that sprouted in the ghetto never grew beyond the walls. South African Jews are forever conscious of injustice, but of the injustice that they alone are made to suffer. They quickly grow furious over the treatment of Israel, the power politics being played out in the Middle East. It is unfair, it is wrong that Israel should be refused her ordinary right to exist. Yet they watch with complacency the innumerable daily manifestations of "apartheid," the South African government's refusal to grant the mass of its subjects any rights whatsoever.

How can this one-eyed morality be defended? Is it any different ultimately from

the hypocrisy with which the Russian delegate to the United Nations denounced Western misdeeds in the Middle East while Soviet tanks were rolling through the streets of Budapest? How many South African Jews of status in the community have I not heard condoning and even casually commending the worst horrors of "apartheid" and, almost within the same breath, pleading for the world to acknowledge at last the cruelties of the Nasser regime. The South African Jewish community was outraged by the seizure of Jewish property and the internment of Jewish civilians in Egypt. It protested publicly and vigorously against the injustice. Yet, when the Africans of Sophiatown were dispossessed of their homes and their right to own land and property in Johannesburg, when they were driven from their houses in the early morning between lines of armed police, how many leaders of Jewish communal organizations protested? There was not one public statement, not one deputation, no representations to the government were made. No wonder then that the late Field Marshal Smuts is a folk hero of the South African Jewish community. That he helped take the vote from the African and took it on his own from the Indian, that he sent the police to shoot African miners on strike, that he even ordered out the air force against villagers who objected to the levying of special taxes—all that counts for nothing.

NO FORM of oppression is as intimately an experience of the Jews as the ghetto. Yet no Jewish organization, let alone the bugle of the community, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, has attacked or even delicately protested against the savage Group Areas Act, which will segregate the races of the country into separate residential pockets at immeasurable sacrifice always to the non-whites. But then since Jews are not to be sorted out from the other whites for purposes of classification and the ensuing distribution of the spoils, what business can it be of theirs?

The invariable excuse for their silence, that Jews as Jews cannot be expected to protest officially against any particular legislation, is ludicrous and, in the context of the community's general pattern of behavior, hypocritical. Jews as Jews in South Africa have often in the past made representations to the government on immigration laws and the control over transfer of funds. They persistently deliver themselves of communal opinions on the conduct of affairs in the Middle East, and that is surely much less their concern than a law herding into ghettos the various races of South Africa and affecting them directly and fundamentally as Jews. If the injustice of the Act counts for nothing, blatant self-interest alone should have dictated the community's protest. It may not always be only the non-whites who are mauled by the provisions of the Group Areas Act. Perhaps the white race will one day sort out its subdivisions. It needs only the addition of a word to the relevant clause—Jews, or Hebrews, have long constituted a separate racial group in government files and government thinking—and the high walls will close them round again. Will the Board of Deputies then at last find its voice? Perhaps, too, the time may come when it is the non-whites who do the herding and the whites the sacrificing. Will the Jews then protest as Jews, although all whites are once more treated similarly? The Anglicans have attacked the "ghetto" Act as Anglicans, the Methodists as Methodists, the Coloureds as Coloureds, and the Indians as Indians. If the Jews are not a race like the Indians, nor a religious community like the Anglicans, what precisely are they, in their own eyes? If they are only just South Africans and nothing else, then the Jewish Board of Deputies has no business to exist, and the Zionist Federation works for Israel under totally false pretenses.

At the time of writing, the Native Laws Amendment bill has passed through the lower house of the South African parliament and is being given a brisk passage through the senate. In addition to giving the Mini-

ster of Native Affairs power to prohibit all social, political, and industrial gatherings of Africans and Europeans together, it confers upon him the authority to forbid the attendance of Africans and Europeans at the same religious service. When the terms of the bill were first announced, there was public uproar. Especially were the churches outraged, as they saw in the bill a frontal assault upon religious freedom. The late Archbishop of Cape Town, on behalf of the whole large Anglican community, not only protested most strongly against the proposed legislation, but the night before his death wrote to the Prime Minister that if the bill were passed he would feel morally obliged to disobey the law and to counsel his subordinates to do likewise. An Episcopal Synod has since reaffirmed this last challenge of the Archbishop.

Similarly, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has taken an extremely strong stand, as have the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Even the apartheid-minded Dutch Reformed Church stirred once for a moment uneasily and made covert representations to the government. Only the synagogues have sat on in silence, and to date only one rabbi has protested against the principles of the bill—in an article in the communal press.

If ever there was a time when South African Jewry should have cried aloud its protest, it was surely at the introduction of a bill to control the freedom of man to worship as they please. Yet it said nothing. Is religious freedom of so little significance to the Jew? Is the memory of the Inquisition now wholly dead? Or is it because there are no black Jews in South Africa and so the right to admit Africans to worship does not affect the community directly? A few servants may no longer be permitted to attend the marriage ceremonies of their masters, but that is surely a small enough price to pay for continued peace with the authorities. When the bishops go to prison or are flogged for incitement to civil disobedience (Criminal Laws Amendment Act), it is not the rabbi or his congregation that need feel at all concerned.

FOR all this, Mr. Jacobson finds the following excuse.

... the present writer must admit that his sympathies are with South African Jews when their irritation is aroused by people who tell them that because they are Jews it is their duty to "throw in their lot" with the Natives, and to "stand by the victims of oppression," and the various other things that outsiders so readily advise them to do. Such things are always easy to say: those who have actually been faced with the catastrophic breakdown in communication between white and black cannot avoid asking such discomfiting questions as "How does one 'throw in one's lot' with the Natives? With which Natives does one 'throw in one's lot'? How does one convince the Natives that one has 'thrown in one's lot' with them?" And to point out to the moralists that what is being asked of one is very possibly the disruption of one's private life, isolation from the only community one knows, and even a readiness to go to jail for one's views. For something which it is barely an exaggeration to describe as a martyrdom of a kind is the penalty paid by those white men who do wholeheartedly seek to better the political and social conditions under which the Natives live, and though there are in South Africa a few white people who do desperately try to cross the gulf between black and white, who do make these great sacrifices, such people are very rare indeed—as rare as they would be anywhere else. The idea that the entire South African Jewish community should, or could possibly, be composed of such individuals is one that it is very difficult indeed to attempt to entertain seriously.

... I cannot believe that it is not significant that the only people actually in South Africa who do loudly and persistently call upon the Jews, because they are Jews, to "throw in their lot" with the Natives are the Communists, who, like Communists anywhere else in the world, make appeals that are permitted by contempt for the fate of particular people in particular situations to have the appearance of being totally "generous" and "idealistic"—the "generosity" and "idealism" being "total" because they have nothing to do with the human possibilities that exist in any particular situation.

Mr. Jacobson must have been away from South Africa for a very long time. The catastrophic breakdown in communication between white and black that he writes of has never, in my own invigorating experi-

ences, taken place. For on the ordinary level of interracial contact—the one level which the government has so conspicuously been able to invade—there has never been any real communication to break down. When black and white stood in the same queues at post offices, there may have been physical commingling, but there was hardly communication. Only recently has any real communication come about, on the one possible level of political and hence social contact. The South African government keeps on introducing ever harsher laws precisely because its attempt to destroy all contact only creates it—in the anti-racial atmosphere of political opposition. The clearest illustration of this is the South African Treason Trial Defense Fund, on the various committees of which are serving men and women of all colors who had no real contact whatsoever with each other before.

I do not find Mr. Jacobson's questions so discomfiting. There are ways in abundance by which white South Africans may "throw in their lot" with the Africans. Up till now, there have been interracial organizations like the Liberal party and the International Clubs of Durban and Pietermaritzburg. And even if these are destroyed under the Native Laws Amendment bill, there will be doors that the government cannot close. No single event, for example, built more solid contact between black and white, and more boisterously undid the work of the government, than the recent Johannesburg bus boycott. That white South Africans should have driven miles out of their way each morning and evening to give lifts in their cars to the boycotters has left an impression on African opinion it will be difficult for even this government to efface. The opposition of the churches to the Native Laws Amendment bill has similarly acted, upon white as well as non-white opinion. And that is why there can be no answers to Mr. Jacobson's last two questions. One does not throw in one's lot with particular Africans. One struggles together with the whole African people, on every level of protest and defense. One does not

have to convince the Africans that one has thrown in one's lot with them. If it is so, they are not slow to acknowledge it.

IN THE light of the stand recently taken by the South African churches, one must assume that a great many white South Africans find the prospect of martyrdom less alarming than Mr. Jacobson. The penalties for incitement to civil disobedience in South Africa are mediocrally savage. Under the Criminal Laws Amendment Act, the punishment for breaking a law in protest is three years in jail, or flogging, or a fine, or three hundred pounds, or any two of these. For encouraging others to disobey a law in protest, the penalty increases to five years in jail, or flogging, or a five hundred pound fine, or any two of these. Yet the Anglican bishops and their clergy, the Roman Catholic bishops and their clergy, the clergy of the Free Churches, and laymen of nearly all the Christian denominations seem prepared to suffer such punishments. Is the idea that in certain circumstances an entire community should be composed of martyrs really so very difficult to entertain? Is the whole history of medieval Jewry not proof sufficient of the possibility of such communal sacrifice?

I am not a Communist. Nor, despite Mr. Jacobson's extraordinary assertion, are many of those in South Africa who loudly and persistently call upon the Jews because they are Jews to throw in their lot with the Africans. I am not a racialist. But I do believe that the Jews have a peculiar heritage and an especial character formed by that heritage. That heritage and that character give them a sharpened sense of the difference between right and wrong, between oppression and liberty, and also a great capacity for sacrifice, yes, even for martyrdom. Unfortunately, that heritage and character also instill in them an enormous fear of authority, a reluctance to fall out with those in power unless it is absolutely necessary to their continued existence as a community. Let us hope that they realize in time just how necessary martyrdom, of the kind of

which they have shown themselves so capable in the past, is and will increasingly be. That at the moment they should be on the side of the persecutors and not the persecuted in South Africa, whether by commission or quiet omission, seems to me an abdication of their moral place in history.

Dan Jacobson:

I was invited by the editors of COMMENTARY to review the recently published *History of the Jews in South Africa* (edited by Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz), and in the course of the review to attempt to give readers outside South Africa a picture of the community as it is today. In the article I indicated that the Jews of South Africa are not, as Jews, taking a stand against the repressive policies of the South African government toward the non-white citizens of the country: this conclusion Mr. Segal confirms very forcefully indeed, and I am grateful to him for doing it.

So it is clearly not on the *fact* of the Jewish stance on the racial problems of South Africa that Mr. Segal takes issue with me. Presumably then it is *because* of my attitude toward this fact that he finds himself feeling—in his words—“cheated” and “angered.” I am sorry that my attitude differs so widely from Mr. Segal’s; but, as a liberal, surely Mr. Segal believes me entitled to hold my attitude and entitled to express it. In what way, then, have I “cheated” him? Why should the expression of an opinion different from his own so “anger” him? Liberals have their weaknesses—as we know—and among them is the belief that anyone who has pretensions to being literate or educated or sensitive must automatically hold the same attitudes as themselves, and share their indignations and moral fervors. Is this the expectation that—having these pretensions—I betrayed? If so, I am not sorry. Whatever might be my view of the racial policies of the South African government, I did not feel that a discussion of the Jewish community in that

country was the occasion for a display of moral indignation. And I feel neither cheated nor angered to find that Mr. Segal disagrees with me.

There are certain minor differences of fact between myself and Mr. Segal, however, that should be mentioned before going any further. Mr. Segal denies my right to use the word “breakdown” in connection with the communication between white and black in South Africa, because, he says, there never was any communication. But he also goes on to say some kind of meaningful political and social communication is now developing. I hope he is right. I have been out of South Africa for about three years, so I cannot speak from personal knowledge about what has been happening there most recently. Three years ago, as far as I could see, there was most certainly the absence of communication to which Mr. Segal refers; and I must confess that the developments he describes do not give me much confidence that there has been a great change since then. Of course devoted men and women continue to make their efforts in this direction, and the condition of the country would be even worse than it is without these efforts. But neither interracial committees nor interracial clubs are new things in South Africa; and the Liberal party has been in existence for more than three years. As for the bus boycott of which Mr. Segal makes so much in the way of black-white cooperation, I would remind him that just after the end of the Second World War there was a very similar bus boycott in Johannesburg; and at that time too certain whites went to great trouble to give lifts to the boycotters. But did *that* make possible the “solid contact” of which Mr. Segal writes? The decade since then has seen a violent and progressive deterioration in race relations in South Africa; and I do not see that the example of cooperation in the latest boycott is going to “undo” the work of the government any more than the last did. Indeed, the meaning that Mr. Segal gives to the word I have quoted is one that quite escapes me.

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For the rest, on this particular issue we must agree to differ. I am glad that Mr. Segal did not find my questions discomforting, and that he is so confident of his ability to communicate with the non-white citizens of the country. These questions, and this problem of communication, troubled me greatly when I was in South Africa. I believe they continue to trouble many other people who are as concerned and conscientious as any I know, and whose reports on their experiences (even in the Liberal party and on interracial committees) are the reverse of "invigorating."

The statement that the only people who persistently call upon the Jews, because they are Jews, to throw in their lot with the Africans are the Communists—this statement of mine is described by Mr. Segal as "extraordinary." I can only say that for some considerable time I was engaged professionally in reading every day the South African press of every shade of political opinion, and during that time the *only* section of the press which "loudly and persistently" made this call upon the Jews were those papers that were Communist or Communist-inspired. This seemed—and still seems—something that was worth noting, in the light of what we know of Communist habits of thought. I accept on the evidence of Mr. Segal's communication that there are non-Communists who share this view; but I do not see any reason to alter my comment upon the kind of thinking that leads to the issuing of such appeals. It still seems to me that, masquerading as a passionate human concern, it is the expression of a contempt for, or an indifference to, or an ignorance of what people are like.

HERE I should say that I wish I knew as confidently as Mr. Segal what the Jewish tradition enjoins on Jews in a situation like that prevailing in South Africa today. Mr. Segal is aware that the tradition is a complex thing. He knows that if it seeks justice, it also encourages "a reluctance to fall out with those in power"; and he knows too that it has always had the elements of

a fierce exclusiveness and an indifference to what happens beyond the "ghetto walls." But apparently Mr. Segal is not prepared to allow that all of these are legitimate aspects of the tradition; and that they all are necessary, continuing, and irreconcilable. From such a tradition, from any ethical and historical tradition, we cannot get a single clear directive to present action; but we can, if we are humble enough in our approach to it, get something more valuable: a sense of the inevitability and permanence of conflict between idea and idea, interest and interest, in any human affair. It is precisely this sense, with its concomitant respect for human motives and actions in all their complexity and waywardness, that I miss in the uses Mr. Segal would make of the long and multi-faceted history of the Jews.

Mr. Segal gives details of some of the recent repressive legislation enacted by the South African government, and indignantly denounces the lack of protest from the Jewish community, as a community, against this legislation; he contrasts this with the official pronouncements made by other religious groups in the country. It seems clear to me that the Jewish community has settled into what is admittedly an unheroic posture: it raises its voice when it feels its own immediate interests are threatened (whether by Soviet-Egyptian policy in the Middle East, or local immigration laws) and for the rest it keeps mum. But in this connection I do not regard it as accidental or trivial (as Mr. Segal seems to) that "there are no black Jews," while there are black Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, and the rest. Has it not occurred at all to Mr. Segal that the examples he gives of church leaders opposing the government are examples of the defense of special interests? I do not say this in any spirit of denigration—I know full well how much South Africa owes to the heroic churchmen it has produced throughout its history; and in any case I do not for a moment believe that it is only disinterested action which should be applauded or which is morally legitimate.

A group has its existence in the sense the

members have of the interests which they share and which are particular to them. In countries happier than South Africa there is a wide agreement among all groups of whatever nature about the interests that all have in common; but whether there is this agreement or not, each group must act in defense of what it believes to be its own interests, or else it ceases to exist as a group. As far as the particular matter under discussion is concerned, to put it crudely, I do believe that had there been black Jews the Jewish religious leaders would have put in their protests along with the others—who were obligated to do so. The Jewish religious leaders perhaps should have protested anyway—Mr. Segal may well be right—but the difference between what prompted the action of the church leaders and that of the rabbis does not seem to me nearly as great as Mr. Segal would have us believe.

HAVING given his examples of the lack of official Jewish protest, Mr. Segal writes: "For all of this Mr. Jacobson finds the following excuse. . . ." Will he believe me when I tell him that I was merely stating what I believed to be the facts of the matter, and was not in any way excusing them? Let me hasten to add that I say this now not as any kind of apology: I did not "excuse" the facts because I saw absolutely no need for excuses; and, in spite of Mr. Segal, still do not. The notion of what I have written being an excuse is all Mr. Segal's, not mine.

The facts, as I saw them, were self-explanatory. I repeat that there are very few white people who try to cross the gulf between white and black (and Mr. Segal does not deny this); that those who do have to make great sacrifices (and Mr. Segal confirms this); and that while there will always be Jews among these people, these Jews will remain a tiny minority among their co-religionists. They will be as tiny a minority as their companions will be among Anglicans, Methodists, or Catholics—Mr. Segal's curiously high (and historically unjustifiable) expectations of Christian white

South Africans notwithstanding. To the minority all honor is due; but to honor the minority does not compel me to regard the majority as altogether despicable, or altogether without dignity. And I would certainly not deny the majority of Jews their right to call themselves Jews, to think of themselves as Jews, and to act together as Jews—as Mr. Segal seems to think of doing.

"Is the idea that in certain circumstances an entire community should be composed of martyrs really so difficult to entertain?" asks Mr. Segal. It is not merely difficult, it is impossible for me to imagine that any community will ever sacrifice itself for the sake of *another*. Mr. Segal's historical parallels seem to me to have a relevance quite the contrary to what he imagines it to be. Does he really need to have it pointed out to him that the Jews in the Middle Ages who sacrificed themselves did so for *their own* beliefs, *their own* way of life, that they sacrificed themselves for what they believed to be *their own* interests as Jews? Does he know of a Jewish community that sacrificed itself for the sake of the Albigensians or Pelagians who were being persecuted then? Did any *group* ever sacrifice itself for the sake of the Jews, either in the Middle Ages or later? Did any group sacrifice itself for the Jews of Europe from 1933 onward?

Until the Jews of South Africa as a group are persuaded of an immediate identity of material and spiritual interest between themselves and the non-whites in the country, they are not going to do what Mr. Segal wants them to do. Of course one can be convinced that the interests of the Jews, as individuals and as a community, are much closer to the interests of the Africans than the Jews themselves seem to realize. And one can do one's best to persuade them to share this conviction. But Mr. Segal hardly seems aware that that should be his task, if he is serious in the appeal that he is issuing. He really makes remarkably little of the question of group-interest and self-interest: the martyrdoms and self-sacrifices

that he calls for from the entire community appear on the whole to be gratuitous, disinterested. I suggest that to talk in this way about any community is merely to indulge an appetite for righteous feeling.

Mr. Segal is very confident of his ability to communicate with black South Africans; but I cannot help reflecting on the quality of the communication he must have with the ordinary South African Jew-in-the-street. (I notice that nowhere does he deal directly with my point that as a result of their upbringing in a passionately color-conscious society, South African Jews in general actually *share* all the color prejudices of their fellow whites.) When I think in the simplest possible way of my innumerable relatives, friends, and acquaintances in South Africa going about their businesses and pursuing what they believe to be their interests, in all conscience I can only wonder what people Mr. Segal thinks he is talking about when he issues his appeals for disinterested sacrifices and martyrdoms, and then grows so angry because there is no reply. Is he talking about people at all?

I realize that much of what I have written must sound ungenerous; it must sound too as though I am indifferent to the moral place of the Jews in history; and that I have a low opinion of the community from which I come. As far as the last is concerned, let me say that I am quite sure that there is as much courage, honesty, and intelligence

among the Jews of South Africa as there is in any other group in South Africa, and in any comparable group of Jews or Gentiles in any other country in the world. And as for the other charges that might be made, I would quite frankly be more perturbed about them if I did not so clearly see where Mr. Segal's generosity to the Africans and high regard for the moral place of the Jews leads him. Having castigated the South African Jewish community for its inaction, he writes, "If the Jews are not a race . . . nor a religious community, what precisely are they in their own eyes? If they are only just South Africans, then the Board of Deputies has no business to exist. . . ."

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies is the South African Jewish community in its organizational aspect. Because he disapproves of the way it behaves, Mr. Segal—secure in his moral fervor, his logic, and the rightness of his own convictions—does precisely what he excoriates the South African government for doing to others: with a stroke of the pen he denies the right of South African Jews to organize themselves for whatever purposes they may think fit.

Such are the consequences of a "generous" and "enlightened" impatience with the frailty and intractability of human beings. This dangerous impatience does not find its warrant in the tradition Mr. Segal claims to be upholding.